

MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM



POEMS
BY
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SOFT RIVER

S O F T R I V E R

All characters in this book are fictional. Any resemblance to any real persons, living or dead, is a coincidence.

The inscription on page 1 is from *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman.

The quotation, in italics, on page 9 is from an Accordions album by the same name.

The quotation, in italics, on page 9 is from *The Poet's Tale; The Birds of Killingworth* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

The quotation, in italics, on page 10, is from an anonymous piece of graffiti seen in CHICAGO, IL.

All other quotations and/or italics are the original work of the author.

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Printed in CHICAGO, ILL. May 2011. by SOFT RIVER PRESS.
This book is one of an edition of 100

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This book is #85 of 100.

*I have heard what the talkers were talking . . . the talk of the beginning and the end,
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.*

C O N T E N T S

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ONE

THERE IS A BIRD ABOVE YOU!

All day I'd been tracking along the Monon in search
of some sign of spring, but only once had come across
Kentucky blue grass curling up a dormant poplar'strunk
and small purple flowers dotting a crushed lawn.

Then,
this one prize.
A cardinal, a preacher!

& then a little cold rain fell.

1.

My eye is always caught by some semblance in the underbrush.
I cannot say what shape I saw save it was a moving mass of brazen black.

We towered between the trees or else they leaned in over us..

See, I remember, once out roaming, the hemlocks had a hum, the
hydrangeas had a hymn, the moon laid green light on Persephone's skin.

She reached up and strained one barbed bough dusted in virescence and
grasped at beyond us.

& you this veiled creature, arcane owl-eyed beggar,
sentient and seated, at the summit of granite hill, slick below
the bellows of a bell
tower doling out strokes lined in luna cornea—

And sterling sings my home in Indiana.
With rusted gullet cried, crow-throated:

You are closer to the bird
than I.

And speaks it plucked
from air unto strings,
a trembling tune of the *moon at half-mast*.

She knows for she
has seen a birch bent rough
right at the neck.

In lavender's field mottled blank prairie
she was the only thing still.

And soon the earth would turn in on itself,
husks of summer pools folding over into winter.

And she would make a nest in a tree,
or in that triangle where the awning meets the eave.

*(Whose habitations in the tree-tops even
are halfway houses on the road to heaven!)*

—This vagrant slouched to sleep on his own slumped shoulders.

2.

The bird sits high in a branchless pine, ordained.

By god, with a fresh smear of red clay
on breast! At best I am smudged red also.

Turned and timber stripped,
we two cedars waning.

Buried slivers in the garden spread
with flowers and their dim names— Daisy, Posie, Poppy;
all little girls with their heads opened to sky.

Bees crawling in and out of their yawning brains— absolutely dumb with sun.

We read words on rock,
graffiti scrawls out *still love you*.

3.

Light threw lines cross your thighs, cross your chest and the feathers that gathered
at your groin and gaping fingers, and your hollow-bone shoulders.

Head-cocked birds watched— bullfinches & bramblings
tits & thrashers,
jays & crows,
sittellas & sparrows & shrikes;
whoever hung round lent a voice—
Cawed a carol of rough-hewn notes sewn
with what we'd snuck off to smoke, and
stood abrupt, where the edge of the scrub
brush'd been hacked off by jutting rock.

4.

c.1962

The sunken living room spread with pickled, tiny-corns, black-pitted olives,
sweet dill and so many deviled eggs.

And there's Mary purling herself into her knitting.
Tendrils of white-blonde wrapped round alpaca homespun.

Chuck was just letting the barn fall down.
Saw it leaning out the window some Thanksgiving time.

Let it languish, lean and loll til' the ceiling's knuckled beams knelt, each rib a
scummed-up cherub.

5.

On the way home, at the station at Gary Metro
we see a set of seven gutted twelve-story tenements needing to be tended to.

Blue-paned windows blocked the color copper rusts into.
Sky flakes off like old bark.

The river was the river Styx with soul-fog slithering over it
and we were crossing into Hades with Hermes who took the
shape of a woman walking down the street dragging a
suitcase and a hockey scythe.

(The graveyard of stumps shown through the scruff
patches of snow and the quarry rose up from below!)

1.

Signs were thrust fore-
most by light or leapt at our approach from the road's edge.

The word's thud on the windshield
read:

3 Mi. Whitestown, Brownsberg

15 Mi. Lebanon, Zion

23 Mi. INDPLS

They lunged from darkness— out of the ditch, the dirt unbirthed.

It was of the same quality— when the storm came— the moon was swallowing,
heaving rain and howling.

Sirens wailed in a circle.
Warned of a cyclone caterwauling
cross the clear cuts toward the city's center.

We retreated to the basement where veiled on the floor was a film of ice water
from the white river.

2.

I woke to another rumbling— a chaotic stammering.
Your naked warding-off of some
misdescript specter scratching
at the windscreen.

We never went back to sleep after that &
I never finished the vision I was ripped from.

One fixed feature reoccurs—
Carolyn's house with an unreal annex.

In each dream its contents shifts:

Annex as Hostel,

a closed, sealed set of rooms.
Room after room of desks with papers strewn between scraps of glass.

Or Annex Atrium.

Right before Chuck died it was & thick with think ferns and
squirming pools of black water—

The house perched on a snowy precipice instead of an upper
middle class subdivision— everything polar aglow.

Annex as psychogynecologist's office.

I'm in hysterics and she's resolved a regimen of antipsychotics to
insert in my vagina.

3.

Chuck was an Antarctic agriculturist, raised alpacas in retirement—
sold off his slab in plots to Limestone & _____ & _____ Co.

Further Chuck was in love with many women all at once.
Left them all a heap of money and not quite enough land to live on.

Marion— his pre-collegiate sweetheart is now a wrinkled
red-haired Arizonian.
Rekindled & went on Alaskan cruises.

Left sullen, weepy, knitting Mary
at home in the red&white house at the end of the driveway.

He left little to Laurie, almost nothing, his daughter. Didn't he love her. Left
her books on Christmases, knew her interest—

How does one even begin the comparison—
judge the gesture, the expression, kneel
to the question of his chapel-hands.

4.

We are all
headed to a one-room cottage in Bohemia.

We are hungry. We are thirsty. We are miserable.

A small house-white
fledgling stomped out— toed ‘tween two stairs.

Open-beaked head fixed to the street under, in the death throes, his unkempt
croak slipped out calm below
the rattle of traffic and train-roar.

The past is a locked storage closet in a strip-mall’s dentist’s office brimming
with brown-stained boxes.

Though they’ve said they’re all mine I’d rather you’d stay behind and gather
them up for me.

This box is full of bike’s spokes, ship’s ruts, only-one shoes, slides in
Kodachrome—

Color-coded. Stacked samples for a microscope:
A catalog of rabbit’s blood.

An archive of place-names curled in pencil on their perimeter:
From Victoria Peak – Hong Kong in a fog.
Or snapshots.

Tunnel light through and see them coughed up on the wall—

Know his gnarled
ear, his greased up forelock?
Hands folded & knelt next to the Christmas tree.

Can’t conjure him.
It’s why I need you to stay here, sift
through these boxes full of rickety bridges
—foot’s creaking the first step.

The contents may have begun a lucid germination.
Careful with the lifting—
White-fleshed rhizomes splayed on sweating linoleum.

TWO

C L A Y P I G E O N

The cat crept
over. He had the face of a murderer & sat
crunching green onions then
hacked up on the sidewalk something brown & soft before pooling
on the patio— a miniature oil slick.

1.

It was a Sunday— we'd been
running errands all morning.

Came home and heaped our clothes on the pennant rug.

We laughed as the once-sucked light of a match's head burnt &
you lost your grip & then under the bed it went, lit.

I knelt on naked but could see only a pile of kindling—

every-
thing
alight
is
under-
foot.

It was an altar, with hymnals tucked.

A ceramic steer with one severed
horn & a set of bronze bookends shaped like praying hands.

2.

Benjamin's dream:

He arrived at a Hotel & the reception-
ist, the man at the desk, told him to go
right on up with his resonator uke. He en-
tered the room just as he was supposed to.

3.

You hunched so sweetly over me, said;

"What is this on the surface of you?"

Márton says it is implicit
in your question—the answer
rests in the crook of the question
mark's full-stop.

T H E O R A C L E A T D E L P H I

*They spawned—like ferns
needed water to replicate.*

1.

Jennifer is the Oracle at INDPLS.

She brings her prophecy in
precise, accented English.

I metrically transcribe
her limbic taxonomy:

*“Since the egg, blue light, I’ve seen, lingering—
In the west, the sky’s a wisp, where all birds
are caught; their wings transfixed.”*

2.

Once when you went down on me under a tree,
I examined the crown of your head; how from the center the hair spiraled
& the capillaries pulsed with eager blood & coming wasn’t a problem.

Later, leaning out the window
I wonder whether
the flat, splayed figure I see hawk or a turkey vulture
oscillating over the interstate.

& lower, in the pitted snow
each stem repeats from its most depleted—
Serrated stalks of Virginia snake root &
goldenrod. White baneberry, pink corydalis,
fourteen varieties of violets & reed canary grass.

WITH LOVE AND THANKS TO:

B E N J A M I N
B E R N T H A L

DR. CHARLES R. STEARNS

C A R O L Y N
S P A C E K

A C C O R D I O N S

P E T E R
O ' L E A R Y

THE WRITING PROGRAM AT THE
S C H O O L
OF THE ART
INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

C . C A S P A R

&ALL MY DEAR FRIENDS
IN THE LOVE TRIBE.

